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THE DESCRIPTION OF SPIRITUAL PHENOMENA UNDER THE FIGURE OF NATURAL CONVULSIONS.

That spiritual phenomena are often described under the figure of natural convulsions is an observation common enough, in connection with both the Old and the New Testaments. Inasmuch, however, as this mode of expression is so little understood popularly that there has been in all ages and still continues to be a disposition to interpret some of these passages literally, and hence to expect in the future great natural convulsions for which the Scriptures really give no warrant, it may be of interest to collect together here some of the clearest instances of such figurative language and apply the results to other passages which are often misunderstood. I retain throughout the language of the authorized version as more familiar and sufficiently exact for the purpose. Perhaps the most striking of all the passages in the Old Testament, both in itself and in the close resemblance of its language to similar passages in the New Testament, is the prophecy in Joel 2 : 30, 31 :

“ I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth,
Blood and fire and pillars of smoke.
The sun shall be turned into darkness,
And the moon into blood,
Before the great and the terrible day of the LORD come.”

It is certain that this language is figurative, not merely on account of the clearly figurative word *blood*, occurring twice ; but also from the context, and from the use made of it in the New Testament. The preceding verses are :

“ And it shall come to pass afterward,
That I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh ;
And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
Your old men shall dream dreams,
Your young men shall see visions.”

And the following verse is :

“ And it shall come to pass,
That whosoever shall call upon the name of the LORD shall be delivered ;
For in mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance.”

Now in the New Testament this whole passage with both the preceding and the following context is quoted in Acts 2: 16-22, and expressly applied to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost; while the promise "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved," is explained of the offer of salvation in the name of Christ. No such convulsions of nature as here described, if taken in their literal sense, occurred at the time of the Christian era, nor is it possible that they should while the term of human probation, here promised, continues. We have inspired authority for saying here that these descriptions are to be understood figuratively and explained of spiritual events.

Similar, and if possible stronger, language is found in Isa. 34—the authorship of the passage is of no consequence for the present purpose:

- v. 4. "All the host of heaven shall be dissolved,
 And the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll:
 And all their host shall fall down,
 As the leaf falleth off from the vine,
 And as a falling *fig* from the fig tree.
- * * * * * * * *
8. "For it is the day of the Lord's vengeance,
 And the year of recompenses for the controversy of Zion.
9. "And the streams thereof shall be turned into pitch,
 And the dust thereof into brimstone,
 And the land thereof shall become burning pitch."

It is generally agreed that these are threatenings against the enemies of the church, first in general, and then against Edom in particular. Although some commentators, as Delitzsch, understand the ultimate reference to be to literal natural convulsions at the end of the world, yet even they are compelled to allow that "the prophet meant primarily, no doubt, that the punishment announced would fall upon the land of Edom, and within its geographical boundaries." (Del. com. in 34:8-10). If the prophecy has then such primary references, it follows that such language is used in a poetical sense to convey the idea "of revolution, of sudden, total, and appalling change" (Alex. com. in 34:4).

To take an instance of an opposite character: In Isa. 11:6-9 is an exquisite description of the peace and happiness which shall come about from the full diffusion of religious knowledge and consequent righteousness, but given in figurative language taken from the lower orders of creation:

6. "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb,
And the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;
And a little child shall lead them.
7. "And the cow and the bear shall feed;
Their young ones shall lie down together:
And the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
8. "And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp,
And the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den."

That all this was figurative in the view of the prophet is evident from the reason given by him (v. 9), "for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord." A moral cause involves moral effects, and while physical effects to some extent may indirectly result from these, they could not be such as are here described. The lion certainly is a carnivorous animal and could only become herbivorous by such a change not only of his disposition, but of his physical structure as should make him cease to be a lion and become a member of some other species. Thus if it were attempted to understand this literally, its whole significance would be destroyed in the very act of making it real.

The 14th ch. of Zechariah is a prophecy so manifestly figurative as to need no proof. The following natural convulsions, among others, are mentioned in it which must needs be understood figuratively in accordance with the general character of the chapter. In verse 4 the prophet having said that the feet of the Lord shall stand upon the Mount of Olives, adds:

"And the Mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof
Toward the East and toward the West,
And there shall be a very great valley;
And half of the mountain shall remove toward the north,
And half of it toward the south."

And again verse 10:

"All the land shall be turned as a plain
From Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem:
And it shall be lifted up and inhabited in her place."

The prophecy in Isa. 40: 3, 4, is so familiar in its description of the Messianic forerunner that we forget almost that this description is clothed in figurative language; yet as soon as attention is turned to it, there again spiritual results are found to be indicated by language expressive of natural convulsions.

- v. 4. "Every valley shall be exalted,
And every mountain and hill shall be made low ;
And the crooked shall be made straight,
And the rough places plain :
5. "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
And all flesh shall see it together."

We may turn now from prophecy to history. This strongly figurative language in historical reminiscences and allusions occurs with especial frequency in the psalms, though by no means confined to them. There both the great features of Israel's history and also the personal experiences of the psalmist are described under the figure of great natural convulsions. For example, in Ps. 114. The exodus of Israel from Egypt is celebrated in these terms :

- v. 4. "The mountains skipped like rams,
And the little hills like lambs." Cf. v. 6.

The prayer for deliverance from distress in Ps. 144 is couched in these terms :

- v. 5. "Bow thy heavens, O LORD, and come down :
Touch the mountains, and they shall smoke.
6. "Cast forth lightning, and scatter them :
Shoot out thine arrows and destroy them."

The title of Ps. 18 states that it is a song of David "in the day that the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul ;" and there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of this title, since substantially the same psalm is given in its historical connection in 2 Sam. 22. David describes this deliverance in highly figurative language at great length. The following lines may serve to recall the whole :

- v. 7. "Then the earth shook and trembled,
The foundations also of the hills moved and were shaken,
Because He was wroth.
8. "There went a smoke out of His nostrils,
And fire out of His mouth devoured :
Coals were kindled by it.
9. "He bowed the heavens also, and came down ;
And darkness was under His feet."

With much more of similar language until in verse 15 it is said :

15. "Then the channels of waters were seen,
And the foundations of the world were discovered."

In this it is of course evident that the language is figurative, and the writer could never have expected it to be understood in any other way.

David's victory over the Syrians and Edomites is celebrated in Ps. 60 according to its title, or if this be not reliable, then some other victory in battle, by praising God in this language :

- v. 2. "Thou hast made the earth to tremble ;
Thou hast broken it."

And the wanderings in the wilderness under the divine guidance are thus described in Ps. 68 :

- v. 8. "The earth shook, the heavens also dropped at the presence of God ;
Even Sinai itself was moved at the presence of God, the God of Israel."

Where the language expresses far more than the historical facts by which the divine presence was manifested on Mt. Sinai. In Ps. 97 the future righteous rule of the Lord is described with reference to some past historical event in these terms :

- v. 4. "His lightnings enlightened the world,
The earth saw and trembled.
5. "The hills melted like wax at the presence of the Lord."

Very much like this is the prophecy of Micah, ch. 1, of the coming of the Lord to punish Israel for its sin :

- v. 4. "The mountains shall be molten under Him,
And the valleys shall be cleft,
As wax before the fire,
And as the waters that are poured down a steep place."

In the song of Deborah (Judges 5) God's providence during the wanderings of the exodus is thus described :

- v. 4. "LORD, when Thou wentest out of Seir,
When Thou marchedst out of the field of Edom,
The earth trembled and the heavens dropped,
The clouds also dropped water.
5. "The mountains melted from before the LORD,
Even that Sinai from before the LORD God of Israel."

And the victory over the forces of Jabin is thus expressed :

20. "They fought from heaven ;
The stars in their courses fought against Sisera."

Similar language is so frequent and familiar that instances need not be multiplied ; the *usus loquendi* is sufficiently established. When we turn to the New Testament, we find the minds of its writers so full of and interpenetrated with this

figurative language that they not only have no hesitation, as in the case of the prophet Joel, in applying it to the spiritual events of their own day, but themselves make use of the same imagery of the darkened sun, the moon turned into blood, and the heavens falling, to describe what is still future. It is certainly reasonable to suppose that they use these expressions in their accustomed and familiar sense. It can make no difference that these passages of the New Testament are in prose; for, not to argue that, in the gospels at least, the words as originally spoken in Aramean may have preserved the parallelism of the Hebrew poetry which they have lost, just as the quotations from the prophets have done, by being turned into Greek, it is enough to say that all the figurative language, as well as the rest of the New Testament, is in prose, and if there were any force in this fact, it would prove that all the parables must be taken as literal histories. The writers of the New Testament evidently felt no hesitation in expressing in the prose of their adopted language the figures of the grand old poets of their native tongue.

Setting aside many passages in the Apocalypse which it is not necessary here to consider, there are two principal passages in the New Testament which are often referred to as involving the promise of the total destruction of this globe together with the surrounding celestial bodies, and that this is to be accomplished in connection with the future judgment upon man. Whether such a dissolution of the existing cosmos in the very far distant future may or may not be a probability of science is a matter with which we are not here concerned. The point is whether any such destruction is intended to be foretold in connection with the coming of our Lord to judgment.

In Matt. 24: 29, 30, our Lord says: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken; and then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven." In the parallel passage of St. Mark the language is almost identical; in that of St. Luke it is somewhat less strong. Certainly these expressions go no further than those already quoted from the prophet Joel, cited and applied to the time of Christ in the Acts, and cannot therefore be held to indicate any more profound natural convulsions than those which occurred at the first promulgation of the gospel.

Such a figurative and poetic interpretation of this passage in the gospels is sometimes thought to be excluded by the well known language in 2 Peter 3:10. Indeed the distinctness with which the future flood of fire is there foretold has undoubtedly added earnestness sometimes to the questioning of the authenticity of that epistle. The words are, "The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up." Among the commentators there is a difference of interpretation as to whether this means a total annihilation corresponding to the original creation, or whether it expresses only the coming about of a sort of chaos out of which a new cosmos shall ultimately be evolved; but there is a general agreement that it indicates at least a mighty change in the whole visible universe. Fortunately we have here not only the general *usus loquendi*, already cited, to determine the sense, but the express interpretation of St. Peter himself. If this be examined, it will become clear that he has no such catastrophe in mind. The context shows that he is combatting the skepticism of his day in regard to the Lord's coming again. The objectors say (v. 4), "Where is the promise of"—the signs indicating—"His coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation;" i. e., "the uniformity of nature forbids the supposition." St. Peter replies that this is not true; that already the course of nature has been controlled for moral purposes in the catastrophe of the flood. Now we all know that so far as the earth's structure is concerned—to say nothing of the heavenly bodies—it was a most superficial event. It came and went, leaving no trace upon the earth itself, but accomplishing the divine purpose in the punishment of human sin. Man was swept away, and to this end those parts of the earth which he then inhabited were buried for a few months under the waters of the deluge. St. Peter, meaning no more than we now mean when we speak of that event, calls it a "perishing" of the earth, and says that just the same thing—although through another instrumentality—is in store for the earth that now is. His language is, "By the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water; whereby the world that then was, being

overflowed with water, perished; but the heavens and the earth which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men" (vs. 5-7). It is clear then that what St. Peter expected was a future catastrophe of like effect with that of the flood. It was nothing that should affect the cosmos in any other sense than that of the figurative language of the prophets of old, with which the mind of St. Peter had been familiar from infancy; it was nothing which should affect even the material earth itself, except in such superficial fashion as might be necessary for the termination of man's period of probation. The "new heavens and new earth" to which he looked forward as the result of this catastrophe, were to be new only in the same sense in which the "heavens and the earth" of Noah's descendants were new in comparison with those of his progenitors.

I do not propose to enter upon the consideration of similar language of the Apocalypse, because it is so closely connected with prophecies of exceedingly difficult and much disputed interpretation; but it may be said in passing that there is nothing there in regard to the particular point under consideration which will refuse to be governed by the same principles of interpretation as have already been applied to the other books of Scripture.

It remains then as the conclusion of this examination of passages that the language of the Scriptures in describing great natural convulsions is the language of figure and symbol to indicate important moral events, and that there is nothing therein prophesied of future catastrophe which should lead us to expect anything more than is comparable to the flood in the past. Science may indicate that the time of man's habitation of the earth is a comparatively short period of the balance of opposing forces; and that as in the past, before this equilibrium was attained, life could find no home here; so in the future, when it shall be disturbed, the earth will again become uninhabitable. But of all this Scripture says nothing. It only tells us that, as there have been great moral convulsions in the history of our race, so there shall be again; as man has once been swept away from the earth, so he yet shall be again.

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